My First DevNet Expert Lab Attempt Ever

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April 11, 2023

In this blog post, I will share my experience with my first DevNet Expert lab attempt, which took place in November 2022. As someone who has never taken a CCIE exam before, everything was completely new to me. Even tough I took the DevNet Expert exam, I think the experience is the same for all CCIE exams.

TL;DR

I attempted my first-ever DevNet Expert lab attempt in Brussels. Despite having a well-laid plan, the experience was a rollercoaster ride. I had to go on last-minute recon missions and battle an unexpected migraine. Unfortunately, I did not pass the exam this time. However, the lessons learned and the challenge of it all were invaluable. And if you enjoyed reading it, you're in luck, because there will be a post about my second attempt!

Before the DevNet Expert Exam

I booked my exam in Brussels, because unfortunately, there are not that many physical lab locations available. The day before the exam, I flew from Zurich to Brussels and arrived at around 7:30 pm. Luckily, there was a shuttle service from the airport to the hotel, which made the transfer relatively comfortable. I felt relieved when I arrived at the hotel, as I was never quite sure if everything would work out with the flight and the hotel. Fortunately, everything has gone smoothly so far.

After checking in, the first thing I did was walk from the hotel to the Cisco office. I wanted to know exactly where to go the next morning so I wouldn't lose any time. It was late and it felt forbidden to spy on a Cisco building in the dark. I thought I was alone, but I met someone else who was also sneaking around the building. He also had a CCIE attempt and had the same idea as me :D

When I returned to the hotel, I had dinner and took a shower. Although studying the night before an exam doesn't help much, I would have felt guilty if I did nothing. Therefore, I reviewed all my notes one last time and made a final phone call to my girlfriend to calm my nerves before going to sleep.

Today is the big day. I woke up at 7:15 a.m. Skipping breakfast is my usual routine, and I didn't want to change it on exam day. I drank some coffee, packed my things, and walked to the Cisco building. The lab is only a 5-minute walk from the hotel, so there wasn't much

time to think. I felt a little nervous, but also happy and proud of myself. When I took my first CCNA exam in college, I never imagined attempting a CCIE certification. However, here I am.

During the Exam

The doors do not open until 8 AM, so I arrived a little later to avoid waiting in the cold. There were approximately eight other students in the waiting area, and as expected, the atmosphere was tense. Shortly after, the proctor arrived and escorted us to the exam room. I was a little disappointed with the lab equipment. I thought it was a high-end lab, but everything was a little older than I expected. Additionally, I was surprised by the high number of surveillance cameras in the room, with approximately one camera per square meter.

Before the exam, we were required to present our ID and sign a document prior to setting up our workstation. You're allowed to have drinks and snacks during the exam. So I brought a bottle of water and snacks… lots of snacks. Crackers, trail mix, chewing gum and dextro energy. I think I could have survived a week in this lab… The proctor even made a joke about the amount of snacks I brought with me :D

But then the exam began. The questions in Module 1 are scenario based. This means that you are given a question and several possible answers. The problem is that if you just read the question, more than one answer could be correct. This is why you are given support material in the form of emails or chat transcripts. Only by looking closely at the resources can you eliminate individual answer choices until, hopefully, only one answer remains. Many details are hidden in the questions, answers, and resources. It is worth reading everything twice before answering. Because of the NDA, I can't tell you how many questions there are in Module 1. But in this video, Kurt Claes (DevNet Expert Program Manager) tells you that there are about 30 items and that you should generally take 6 minutes for each question. But you didn't hear that from me…

Module 1 went moderately well. I wasn't really sure if my answers to the questions were correct. What bothered me the most was the environment. I was sitting in the front row with the proctor in front of me. He was getting chat messages and phone calls and his cell phone was making noise all the time. One time he came with a repairman and looked at some water damage in the ceiling. And then we had to choose what we wanted for lunch. The proctor stood in front of all of us and asked us what we wanted to eat. "We have sandwich options: ham, cheese, ham and cheese, or tomato and mozzarella. Person A, what do you want? Now person B. Person C?" and so on. I was happy when he finished. But then he asked, "What would you like to drink? We have Coke, Coke Zero, Sprite, water. Person A? Person B? Now person C?" Some didn't understand what he said so he had to repeat all the options again. That might be okay with two people, but we were a relatively large group… I don't want to scare you. Just be prepared for it to get a little loud.

Before lunch I finished module 1 and started module 2. The first task didn't work right away and took longer than expected. At that point I started to get worried. After the first task, we had lunch. There was total silence and everyone was just eating their sandwiches. I wanted to use the time to calm down a bit, but after about 15 minutes the others wanted to continue with the exam. I went to the restroom first, and when I came back, the proctor had already started the exam again. I may have only lost a minute, but I was immediately stressed again.

Unfortunately, I didn't get out of that stress until the end. When I'm extremely stressed, I tend to get migraines. And around 14:00 I noticed that it was happening. I had packed snacks for a whole week, but for some reason I didn't bring any painkillers. At first the pain was not too bad. I tried to block everything out and concentrate on the exam, but I couldn't give 100%.

Not only did my brain fail me, but my exam strategy was not the best either. My brilliant strategy was to solve all the tasks first and then check if all my answers were correct later. In theory, this seems like a good approach, but I didn't take into account that it would take too long to solve all the problems, leaving no time for any real verification. For each problem you know how many points you get. The problem is that you only get points if your solution works 100%. If you miss a detail, you get zero points. So it's better to solve only 50% of the questions and check for correctness than to solve 100% of the questions without any verification.

After the DevNet Expert Exam

My migraine was getting worse and I was glad when the exam was over. It's only a 5 minute walk from the lab to the hotel, but I had to take several breaks and almost threw up twice. A colleague told me that it would be difficult, but I should try to enjoy my first lab exam. But so far it was not my most pleasant experience…

After the exam, I wanted to take notes right away. Unfortunately that didn't work out. From the hotel I took the shuttle back to the airport, went straight to the gate and slept until my flight arrived. It wasn't until I arrived in Zurich that the migraine started to fade away and I felt better. All the time I was wondering if I had passed or not. Every 5 minutes my feeling changed between "maybe I have passed" and "I will go to Brussels again in a month".

I got home around 22:00. I checked my email every few minutes, hoping the result would be there by now. Around 23:00 I wanted to go to sleep, but I checked my email again. This time I got an email. The results are in and I can check them online. When the results come in that fast, it's either extremely good or bad. I still had some hope, but deep down I knew I didn't pass. The results confirmed it. So off to bed and back to Brussels in 30 days :)

If you enjoyed this blog post, you're in luck. There's a second and third blog post about my certification journey. And after finally passing the exam, I created my own DevNet Expert e-learning. Check it out if you're interested in becoming a DevNet Expert yourself!